Mothers and Daughters of Bleak House

There are many different types of mothers and daughters – beyond the traditional of blood relations. In Charles Dickens Bleak House we are introduced to examples of different mother daughter relationships throughout the text, and interlacing the more than twenty female characters that appear.

For purposes of this paper, only a few of these referenced relationships will be highlighted and discussed, including their presence, their established class and expected role in the works, and how these relationships served in the construction of the central elements of the story. To effectively demonstrate these relationships, a consideration of the role of Victorian women and how Dickens contributed or abutted this expectation, will be discussed. Additionally a review of some of the various mother daughter relationships present in Bleak House, both positives and negatives, will be identified and contrasted.

During the Victorian period it was expected and encouraged that a woman's place was in the home. Women were the caregivers of the world. Their lives were supposed to be centered on their family. The characterization of the woman did not frequently come into question; what did is whether or not they were effective in their expected role. “A mother may be perfectly robust and healthy but still be effectively ‘absent’ to her child: the determinant is not whether she is sweet-natured or cruel but whether she provides adequate guidance, nurturance, and support for her offspring.”

Charles Dickens mimicked this philosophy and expectation in his work. “The mother in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel is highly realistic in some respects, highly improbable in others.” (McCormick, 16) A lot of this approach is drawn from his own upbringing and childhood experience. It seemed that the struggles he endured growing up, and his attitude and reflection on women, as demonstrated in his pieces, showcase this. “The haunting agony that made Dickens a man of great insight has also brought a similar achievement to the abandoned and orphan-like Esther.”

The women in Dickens's novels clearly reflect the traditional Victorian ideals of his time. “[Dickens] liked to give the sexes their respective roles.” Despite Dickens’s ability to showcase the society he knew, and portray the women who existed in his London, he was also able to provide silent heroines and strengths in women that many works of this period were not showcasing. Take the case of the fallen woman. While Victorian society was quick to shun and socially exile such a woman to the point that she had to deny any association with such a condition, Dickens instead demonstrated a sympathetic angle in Bleak House. “The extremes of behavior depicted in a mother are not only conceivable in literal terms but immanent in metaphorical ones: they represent reality on a certain level.”

This point has been argued in that Dickens took great effort to stay in alignment with Victorian characteristics for women.

“Dickens’s good women have affections and warm hearts, but never sexual desires; his tainted women, the adulteresses, are or may have been involved in liaisons, but they are essentially cold, emotionally aloof and icy. None of his women display anything faintly resembling sexual passion, so that love in Dickens I either a very tame, essentially domestic affair, or a melodramatic horror of disgrace and guilt.”

The fallen woman was often scandalized and dramatized in various works of the time. These types of expletives were replicating what happened in Victorian society, and demonstrated how society would react, as well as the expected actions and repercussions of such women.

Women who had children out of wedlock, and who were unable to financially support their children had to face the difficult decision whether to keep the child or turn the infant over to another’s care. “The distinction between the woman of the hearth and the woman of the streets no longer holds; the prostitute has now become a wife, and along with her urban pollution of all kinds has invaded the preserves of middle-class life.”

In a sense, Dickens challenged Victorian societal status and expectations by addressing and including such a scandalous event in his work. “Bleak House is among other things a protest against attaching a stigma to illegitimacy.”

With Lady Dedlock as a member of high class society through marriage, we are provided not only the sacrifices that have been made by Lady Dedlock to hush and dismiss such a horrendous and disgraceful activity, but additionally, the penance that came with her tainted past, and how it further affected the life of her daughter, Esther. “The sins of the mother are … visited on the child, as they inevitably are in the case of Lady Dedlock and Esther Summerson.”

Charles Dickens further challenges this philosophy and societal expectation by creating Esther into a heroine of the story, of her story. “Esther seems to be an angel, an image of ideal womanhood in the Victorian age.”

Esther’s evolution both embraces and reflects Victorian social situational expectations, but also surpasses them as she is accepted in society despite her situation, supported by her friends and surrogate family, and flourishes into an accomplished and respected wife. “Esther is one of the narrators of Bleak House, and is liked by Dickens, and meant to be liked by the readers of Bleak House, for she will eventually become a force of social change.”

As the most obvious mother daughter relationship demonstrated, Dickens provides his readers with an unconventional structure. Lady Dedlock is indeed Esther Summerson’s mother, however due to the out of wedlock affair and pregnancy, resulting in the birth of her illegitimate daughter, Esther; Lady Dedlock becomes a non-existent mother. She is forced by society, and her high-class status, to dismiss and not claim any sort of connection. Dickens demonstrates through his narration the desire for this relationship between Esther and Lady Dedlock. “When Esther and her mother rest in each other’s arms…. Esther is the agent in this scene, lifting her mother from the position of abject misery and embracing her with an ideal of natural maternal love.”

Lady Dedlock is a tragic figure as her situation and secret past jeopardizes the life she has come to live, the role she plays in this society and air and attitude that accompanies such a role. As a fallen woman, Dickens demonstrates how Lady Dedlock, accepting her fate, as her one true love dies, she accepts her position’s responsibilities, but still aims to establish connections with long lost, and actually thought to be deceased, daughter, Esther.

Dickens further abuts his Victorian societal expectations of such a condition through this mother daughter demonstration.

One of Dickens’s overarching themes in this novel is the need for social reform. Women like Lady Dedlock should not have to be separated from their children, and should not have to live a certain way because society says they should. If Dickens truly believes that women, even fallen women, were born to be happy, and shows us that Lady Dedlock is not happy in her situation, then there must be a need to reform society’s constraints on women, their freedom, and their happiness. …. Dickens’s call for social reform would be for the benefit of these women, and the benefit of their children who are innocent of the sins of their fathers, or mothers, as Esther is.”

Two other mother daughter like roles also appear in Bleak House. The first type is a positive demonstration of the surrogate mother/big sister relationship. Esther plays this role with both Ada Clare and Caddy Jellyby.

Recruited by Mr. Jarndyce to be a companion for Ada, a ward in the ongoing and never ending Jarndyce and Jarndyce case, Esther quickly establishes and nurtures her role. With Ada and Richard Carstone, another ward in the case, Esther is embraced and loved like a sister. As Ada and Richard are basically orphans, Esther’s presence, nurturing mannerism, and natural maternal characteristics, only strengthen the friendship she has with these two. “Why does Richard want Esther to move in with him and Ada when they get married? …does he mean that Ada and himself really want their friend to live with them because of how [like a] mother she is?”

The answer to this question seems like yes. Esther has developed this wonderful friendship and relationship with these two people, and since the three of them entered the Jarndyce household together, met pretty much at the same time, their fast friendship has evolved to where they are connected, love, and care about each other deeply.

Caddy Jellyby met Esther when Esther, Ada, and Richard visited her family. Instantly Caddy and Esther became friends. Caddy’s own mother neglects her and her siblings, and has shelved Caddy with the responsibility of writing letters to gain support for various groups in Africa. Caddy loathes her position in her family and Dickens has emphasized her desire to escape her situation.

With Caddy, Esther and Caddy become quick friends and it is obvious to see how easily Caddy is drawn to Esther. Esther feels compassion for Caddy and her siblings, and Esther easily demonstrates her natural maternal tendency, providing a sympathetic ear to Caddy. She feels no hesitation to share with Esther her feelings about her mother, as well as girlie like secrets, such as her love for Prince.

What is interesting is that while Caddy and Ada seem closer in age, it is to Esther that Caddy develops this friendship and relationship with, not Ada. Furthermore, it is established in the story, how Caddy is extremely comfortable, despite her class level and struggles with her mother, with sharing and trusting Esther.

“From the outset, children are naturally attracted to her … Caddy’s inclinations to place her in the role of a mother, and Jo’s indistinctive devotion are only a few of the instances in which young people are drawn to her.” This point is further supported through Esther’s friendship and surrogate mother role to Charley, her maid. Esther meets Charley when it is discovered that Charley has become a mother to her siblings. Charley’s own mother died early on, and then her father died. Charley, a young girl seemingly of twelve, willingly without complaint, took on the role to support her little brother and baby sister.

Charley and Esther are become very close, and it is clear that Charley is devoted to Esther, staying with her throughout her smallpox infection. While initially resistant to having a maid, Esther takes Charley under her guise and provides her with the same affection and maternal support naturally. “Esther is teaching her servant Charley (herself a substitute ‘mother’ to her motherless siblings) to write.” (Dever, 58) Esther never hesitates from giving of herself to those around her.

Despite class levels negative mother types emerged in many ways fell into conceived stereotypes of the era. “Among the numerous character flaws ascribed to mothers through all the ages and all the forms predating the novel, stupidity – here interpreted broadly to mean anything from simple-mindedness and lack of imagination to sloppy reasoning and willful ignorance – had never been so prominent as it comes to be in the nineteenth century.”Dickens did not hesitate to insert these harsh examples of motherhood into Bleak House.

Another type of mother daughter relationship that is not as pleasant to review is that of cruelty and neglect. Two examples of the negative type of mother represented include Miss Barbary and Mrs. Jellyby. Miss Barbary, Esther’s godmother and aunt, made it very clear what she thought of Esther and her mother. “I see her knitted brow and pointed finger – ‘Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers.’” (Dickens, 157) This consistent harshness and continued attack to her parental background, seemed to only enhance Esther’s graciousness and maternal nurturing she has for others.

Esther soon has no desire to remember anything about her godmother after she dies. Although, the disrespect and cruelty she received has scarred her greatly. “When Esther and Mr. Jarndyce were speaking about her past and how all she remembers from her early childhood is that she is ‘her mother’s disgrace’.”

Esther is able to become a type of surrogate mother and big sister to Caddy, it is only because Caddy’s mother, Mrs. Jellyby was a prime example of a neglectful mother. As previously mentioned, Victorian society was only concerned in that mothers played the role of being the caregiver in their family. It did not seem to matter if they were not maternal in nature. Dickens presents Mrs. Jellyby with the façade that her actions represented what she thought was the most respectable action, charity and philanthropy in society – even if it was for selfish and not altruistic reasons.

Dickens successfully highlights the worst of these types of fraudulent people in his piece. McCormick shares that

“also typical are the two do-gooders in Bleak House, Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle: the former, enrapt as she is in the philanthropic salvation of Barrioboola-Gha, can spare no time either to pick her bruised toddlers up off the floor or her soggy African correspondence out of the gravy pitcher. The latter, ‘a formidable style of lady’ who has dedicated herself to such causes as the Tockahoopo Indians and the Great National Smithers Testimonial while her own six sons physically and emotionally waste away.”

Victorian era mothers and daughters despite their class level, were somewhat challenged, however as Dickens also followed traditional Victorian societal thinking, the roles for the women he has included in his pieces, must equally fall into their expected roles. It seemed that this is what Dickens did. Lady Dedlock demonstrated a fallen woman from middle class status who married into high class status and how she hid her secret, lived with it, and then succumbed to it. “Lady Dedlock, a fictionalized example of a fallen woman, Dickens does not encourage society to accept women who are or have been in such situations. Instead, fallen women are expected to adapt to the guidelines that have been set for females all along.”

Ada and Caddy showcased how close friends can be like sisters and surrogate daughters to a doting and devoted friend, like Esther. While Ada was of a higher middle class than Caddy, Esther did not discriminate in her affections for these women, giving them her sisterly love and maternal support.

Miss Barbary and Mrs. Jellyby, like Ada and Caddy, both come from middle class, but from the opposite ends of it. However this fact does not discredit their negative maternal actions. Miss Barbary, and the snobbery of her feelings towards Esther and her sister, adds to the downward treatment she gives Esther. Furthermore, Miss Barbary highlights Esther’s situation, moving her to societal outcast, despite her class upbringing.

Mrs. Jellyby on the other end of the middle class, attempts to elevate her position by exaggerating her philanthropic activities, which instead only farce her actual maternal actions, or lack thereof. “When Dickens next creates a female character explicitly devoted to the rights and emancipation of women, it will be Mrs. Jellyby, whose position as a disastrous middle-class mother makes her not just a comic figure but a malignant one.”

An interesting point, however is that Dickens has also created elements of missing mothers. We have Esther’s seemingly thought dead mother, who actually turns out to be alive, Charly’s dead mother, the orphaned Ada and Richard, and Caddy’s Africa-drawn mother. “The missing mother in this novel is potentially everywhere but actually nowhere. As the figure of connection and comfort and protection, she stands in sharp contrast to the neglectful mothers actually present in the text.”

Lady Dedlock as Esther’s long lost mother also demonstrates a characteristic common in many novels of the time period. Dickens has employed this theme, through the varied missing mothers mentioned, in this work. “Occasionally a variation on the motherless theme occurs when a character presumed motherless turns out to have (or to have had) a mother after all.”

Bleak House has many depictions and representations of traditional Victorian society lifestyles, the class roles and responsibilities, and the scandal that can interject into these levels. Dickens has successfully showcased Victorian societal mother-daughter examples throughout Bleak House. “In [Dickens’s] preface to the first edition of Bleak House he insists that what looks like exaggeration is in fact a most strenuous respect for accuracy.”

Victorian society expectations categorized folks into classes with the understanding that certain roles must be kept, despite corruption, despite love, despite the results of pursuing passion.

Lady Dedlock and Esther Summerson. Mother and daughter. Long lost mother and long thought dead daughter. Reunited and then torn apart again, by death. Lady Dedlock was the missing mother, and while she and Esther did find each other, because of societal class rules and the fact that Esther was a love child born in secret, their new found relationship could not be celebrated.

Esther Summerson and Ada Clare. Esther Summerson and Caddy Jellyby. Esther Summerson and Charley Neckett. Surrogate mother and surrogate daughters. Surrogate sisters. Esther successfully develops strong friendships with these three women, and in doing so takes on different roles. In some cases she’s a mother type to them; providing maternal and nurturing support to each one. In other cases she’s a sister type to them; providing support and compassion to each in their situations.

“Esther’s constant harping on her own deficiencies and the goodness of others in attributing virtue to her, as well as the strong need to give and receive love, grows” out her upbringing. Through these relationships, Esther is also able to benefit as she goes through her own struggles, like her smallpox infection and the recovery that scars her. Each of these women reciprocates the love and support she gave them. Their friendship and sisterhood is strengthened through these different challenges and experiences.

Miss Barbary and Esther Summerson. Godmother/aunt and goddaughter/niece. Miss Barbary’s, sometimes seemingly jealous, attack on Esther’s heritage provided Esther with a distraught and unquestionably sad childhood. “The godmother has only ever offered Esther a cheerless existence.” Esther grows to dislike and in the end disregard her godmother’s existence. Miss Barbary represented the voice of the Victorian society, highlighting throughout this piece, what society felt and thought about Esther’s situation.

Mrs. Jellyby and Caddy Jellyby. Mother and daughter. Mrs. Jellyby was the epitome of a neglectful mother.

“Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby in particular represent the clearest instances of misplaced priorities and malign neglect, as they exploit and ignore their many children in favor of ‘causes,’ feeding the children of Africa, Borrioboola-Gha, and the Tockahoopo Indians while neglecting their own.”

Because of Mrs. Jellyby’s attitude and treatment of her children, Caddy and her siblings are starved for maternal attention. They are immediately drawn to Esther’s nurturing nature. Mrs. Jellyby, while still be with her children and in theory, fulfilling the caregiver role, does not really notice her own children and their needs, and instead demonstrates how false philanthropy can circumvent and block out the urgency of one’s own home life needs.

While not really highlighted in any other source, the presence of mother daughter relationships in Bleak House can most definitely be seen. Whether or not Dickens intended to interject so many varied types and representations into this work is not clear. However, his technique of highlighting the societal class and gender roles as demonstrated and expected during his Victorian London are evident. The mother daughter portrayals are present and while they most obviously surfaced to the top for me, this paper has attempted to catalog how different mother daughter groupings can be identified and contrasted, and taking a slight look into the role class might play in these associations, as found in Charles Dickens Bleak House.